

Chapter Twelve -- "White Man Workin' "

North Carolina wasn't very good to us, an' it was just one year before we moved to West Tennessee, close to Grand Junction. And for the first time I could remember, I was out of the mountains.

But we got a few things out of the Tarheel State besides chicken pox an' measles -- mostly bitter experience.

When we first got there we stayed a week or two with a family that had an ox named Walter, but as soon as our furniture got there we moved into a big ol' house over a hundred years old, with log fireplaces four feet wide an' two deep. The rooms were big, an' built on different levels, like a castle. It was in one of those big wood fireplaces, when I had chicken-pox, that Ernest showed me how to roast an egg over the fire, with a splinter in it to keep it from all boiling up over the edge of the shell.

We were right between Mount Mitchell an' Mount Pisgah, an' when the sun was just right in the mornings we could see a flash of light where it was reflected from the windows of the Vanderbilt hunting lodge right on top of Pisgah.

The old house was on part of a dairy farm which belonged to a man named Cushing, that we chillen called "Mr. Cushaw", an' Ernest worked for him to get up enough money to start to college the next year. There was a hired man there named Will Walker, who couldn't read or write, but urged us children to study.

"I know I've been chawed out of a many a nickel because I

couldn't count," he said again and again.

It was my first year in school, and it wasn't unpleasant, what with seeing our first pebble-dash houses, and learnin' new ways, an' watchin' the trains go by on the Spartansburg branch of the Southern Railroad.

Ernest had helped put in the crop, an' because they were short-handed an' he never minded makin' a nickel, Father had helped too, after school was out. But when we went to move to Tennessee, where Father had got a better school, he found out what a mistake he'd made.

The landlord went before a squire an' filed suit to make us stay till after the crop was reaped, which would have been too late for Ernest to start to college, or Father to go to the new school.

Father paid ten dollars to see a lawyer in Hendersonville, an' I found out later what happened.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Swetnam," the lawyer said, "but he can take everything you've got if you try to leave. There's a law in this state that lets an employer sue on a verbal contract if an employe causes him any loss by leaving before the work is all done."

"But we didn't have any contract," Father said.

"I believe you," the lawyer said. "But the squire won't. The law says that the employer's word is to be taken against that of the worker in a case of this kind. The fact that you've already done some work on the crop would be taken for proof that there was a contract."

I was too young to realize much of what was going on, even from what Mother said when she heard me singin' an old song I'd picked up, somewhere:

Got a white man a-workin' for me.

Got a white man a-workin' for me.

Oh, it's worth what it costs,

An' I'll pay all the loss,

For it's worth what it's costin' just to be the boss.

Got a white man a-workin' for me.

Got a white man a-workin' for me.

It's the white agin the blacker,

An' I'll chew my fat terbacker,

Got a white man a-workin' for me.

The landlord wasn't colored, but the parallel was close enough.

"That's how he feels," Mother said bitterly. "He's got a white man workin' for him. And he's going to keep you."

But he didn't, and the thing that had made the blow so crushing at first was the thing that saved us part of what we had.

Mr. Cushing hadn't said a word about what he was going to do till we had everything packed up and ready to go, though we'd made no secret of leavin'. It may have been the lawyer that told Father what to do. I don't know.

Everybody was in sympathy with us, and the station agent helped, but Father had to bribe the drayman to keep quiet about the fact that he'd been hired.

Father picked a day when he knew Mr. Cushing would be away on business. There hadn't been any formal attachment on our stuff, for he thought his bluff had worked, and one day just an hour before time for the local freight to stop at the station at Fletcher, a half mile

away, two teams and wagons pulled up and loaded on everything but what we had to have to travel with. And the agent set the signal, and had the bills of lading made out, and before Mr. Cushing knew anything about it, everything was on the train and gone.

Mr. Cushing was mighty mad, an' threatened to take even our trunks and bags, but they finally settled it when Ernest gave him a good watch he'd traded for a little while before. Of course neither he nor Father got any pay for all the work they'd done, but Ernest went on to college, and did all kinds of work, and we tightened our belts and got by that next year somehow.

We never did get into anything like that again, though Father often worked in between teaching, and so did we. I guess the Supreme Court's rulings on peonage wouldn't let such things happen now.

I've hoboed an' worked all over the country, an' the nearest I ever came to gettin' into any kind of trouble was down in Florida, when the Sheriff jerked the Alabama license plate off my old car because he found out I was workin' as a fruit tramp, an' I had to buy Florida plates.

That was a kind of raw deal, because fruit tramps only get to work a few weeks in any one place, an' that was back in the depression, when packers only got four cents a lug for packin' tomatoes, an' I was gradin', which only paid a quarter an hour, an' had to pay a dollar a day at the company hotel. An' to make it worse, the crop was runnin' out, an' I'd been laid off that day an' was goin' to leave the state.

I'd gone to Miami hopin' to get a job hoppin' bells in a hotel. But the season was a bad one. I washed dishes a while for two dollars a week an' my meals, an' then a girl got me a chance

to work in a tomato factory, because her other boy friend was the foreman. Of course he didn't know everything. He thought I was some other girl's boy friend.

Jobs were scarce as hen's teeth just then, an' I never had looked a tomato in the face except at table or on the vine. So when he asked me if I'd ever been a fruit tramp I told him I'd graded apples out in the Wenatchee Valley in Washington, which seemed far enough away -- and was. I knew it was no use to say I'd ever packed, for I was too slow, an' besides, I doubt if there was a hump open in Florida.

A "hump" is a little stand where the packer sits an' packs the tomatoes that are pushed over to him off a moving belt, or in a small place, out of a grading box that the grader works over with his hands. One grader should keep up with one packer, an' makes about half as much money.

The packers got a stack of wooden boxes, an' they had to wrap each tomato in tissue paper an' fit it into the box, or lug, which was about eighteen inches square an' six deep.

Tomatoes were sized accordin' to the number you could pack to a row, an' how many rows, like 8-8's, an' 6-8's, an' 6-6's, an' so on. Up to the 6-6's you packed four layers to a lug, an' above that, three. The biggest tomatoes were pushed off the belt at the front an' smaller on back, smallest at the end. Since the smallest tomatoes were hardest to pack, the head packer went back to the foot every half day, an' all the packers moved up one place, to give everybody an equal chance.

There really wasn't a space open grading, but they were puttin' in an extra hump on 7-6's, an' fixed me a place to stand an' push

'em off. It looked easy, but in about half an hour it seemed as if I was movin' instead of the belt, an' I was sick as a dog. Seasickness is nothin' compared to that. But I got over it by next day.

I got some experience gradin' tomatoes, an' learned the 14 different things that can make one a cull. It's a cull if it's showin' any pink color, or is too green, or too small, or too big, or grows crooked, or has a worm, or any hole in it, or leaks juice anywhere, or has stem end rot, or blossom end rot, or just rot, or is wind-scarred more than a tiny bit, or has lumps on it, or is a "puff", which means it has grown with air pockets in it. Any cull has to be thrown away and can't be sold at all, except for the pink ones, which can be sold as ripens, for immediate use or canning.

One thing I did get out of that job, for the money wasn't much. But I worked there long enough to get a pretty fair understanding of fruit tramps, who probably move oftener than any other species of man-kind except regular bums and Gypsies. They start in Florida or California in winter, and work north, east or west with the seasons.

They were always comin' in from nowhere, an' movin' on to some place where they heard wages were better.

Where I was they paid four cents a lug for packin' the smaller sizes, an' three cents for 6-6's an' above. But somebody was always bringin' in rumors of some place where there was a "snow crop" so big it had everybody snowed under with work, an' they were payin' five cents a lug.

The fruit tramps had a story they told on themselves:

Once a fruit tramp died an' went up to the Pearly Gates, but he couldn't get in.

"I'm sorry," St. Peter told him. "There isn't an empty hump in the place, and Heaven is just full of extras waiting for a chance to find a job."

The fruit tramp went off and studied a while, and then he came back to the Pearly Gates again.

"I told you there wasn't any room," St. Peter told him. "I'm sorry, but you can't get in."

"I don't want to get in," said the fruit tramp. "I just want to send some word to my friends inside. Just tell them there's a snow crop in Hell, and they're payin' ten cents a lug."

St. Peter took in the message, and in no time the fruit tramps were grabbing their bags and checkin' out, till in no time Heaven was empty.

The fruit tramp went in then, an' he hung around a while, but after a day or two he got restless. He got his bag and checked out.

"What's the matter?" St. Peter asked. "Don't you like it here?"

"It's fine," the fruit tramp said. "But I just thought maybe I'd better run down to Hell and see if maybe there was something to that story about their havin' a snow crop an' payin' ten cents a lug."